



Protection as care: Moral reasoning and moral orientation among ethnically and socioeconomically diverse older women

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ABSTRACT

This study examined moral reasoning among ethnically and socioeconomically diverse older women based on the care and justice moral orientations reflecting theoretical frameworks developed by Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg, respectively. A major gap in this area of research and theory development has been the lack of examination of moral reasoning in later life. This study addressed this gap by assessing socioeconomically and ethnically diverse older women's reasoning in response to ethical dilemmas showing conflict between autonomy, representative of Kohlberg's justice orientation, and protection, representative of Gilligan's care orientation. The dilemmas used in this study came from adult protective services (APS), the U.S. system that investigates and intervenes in cases of elder abuse and neglect. Subjects were 88 African American, Latina, and Caucasian women age 60 or over from varying socioeconomic status backgrounds who participated in eight focus groups. Overall, participants favored protection over autonomy in responding to the case scenarios. Their reasoning in responding to these dilemmas reflected an ethic of care and responsibility and a recognition of the limitations of autonomy. This reasoning is highly consistent with the care orientation. Variations in the overall ethic of care and responsibility based on ethnicity and SES also are discussed.

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Introduction

A rich body of research on moral reasoning has developed over the latter half of the 20th century, continuing to the present time. Lawrence Kohlberg, who created the first fully articulated and most influential theory of moral development, held that cognitive and moral reasoning develop in tandem, with higher levels of moral reasoning emerging as an outgrowth of abstract and logical reasoning abilities (Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1990). Kohlberg's theory describes the structure and development of justice reasoning from childhood into adulthood, a trajectory that was posited to involve a culturally universal and invariant sequence of six stages within three broader levels of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1973; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977; Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990; Levine, Kohlberg, & Hewer, 1985). As moral reasoning develops, interpersonal considerations in moral reasoning become subordinated to an increasing emphasis on

universal principles of justice, with a focus on equality, human rights, and respect for the individual (Gump, Baker, & Roll, 2000; Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990; Levine et al., 1985).

Carol Gilligan proposed an alternate theory of female moral reasoning development based on criticism of gender bias within Kohlberg's theory (Gilligan, 1977, 1982). This theory specifies a distinct female moral language in which the primary moral imperative is the "obligation to exercise care and avoid hurt. The infliction of hurt is considered selfish and immoral in its reflection of unconcern, while the expression of care is seen as the fulfillment of moral responsibility" (Gilligan, 1977, p. 12). Gilligan's model for female moral development describes three moral reasoning levels with two transitional stages separating the levels. Moral reasoning at the first level is focused on the needs and survival of the individual self. At the second level, moral goodness is equated with self-sacrifice, and we see a conventional understanding of femininity that defines one's worth in terms of caring for and protecting others. In the third level, the orientation to self-sacrifice is subordinated to considerations of responsibility, caring, and the obligation not

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to hurt, which are directed not only towards others, but also towards the self. At this stage, truthfulness in acknowledging one's own needs changes from being viewed as selfish, as it is seen in the second level, to having connotations of honesty, fairness, and acceptance of personal responsibility (Gilligan, 1977). Both Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories can be understood more fully when contrasted with one another; the former reflects an individual-based morality of abstract principles of justice and rights from a separate and autonomous perspective, and the latter reflects a relationship-based morality based on interpersonal considerations of caring and responsibility.

Despite Gilligan's contention, most research fails to find a statistically significant gender difference in stage using Kohlberg's theory (e.g., Maqsood, 1980; Murphy & Gilligan, 1980; Pratt, Golding, Hunter, & Sampson, 1988; Walker, 1984; Wilson, 1995; Zeidner & Nevo, 1987). However, a different way to look at moral reasoning is through the lens of moral orientation, as opposed to stage of moral development. Moral orientation refers to an individual's preferred moral reasoning style, and it is different from the concept of staging. For example, someone could score at a high level on an assessment of Kohlberg's stages, but still have a preference or orientation towards the care perspective of moral reasoning described by Gilligan, or vice versa.

Gender and moral orientation

Studies (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Lyons, 1983; Pratt et al., 1988; Walker, 1989) employing a methodology in which participants respond to real-life dilemmas that they themselves had chosen have found men to favor justice reasoning, and women to favor care reasoning. However, it is likely that this is due to females being more likely to select personal dilemmas, which have been shown to elicit care reasoning, and males being more likely to select impersonal dilemmas, which have been shown to elicit justice reasoning (Pratt et al., 1988; Walker, 1989). Studies using hypothetical dilemmas—in other words, studies in which all participants have the same dilemmas—have found no gender differences in justice reasoning (Gump et al., 2000; Pratt et al., 1988; Smetana, Killen, & Turiel, 1991; Walker, 1989; Weisz & Black, 2002; Wilson, 1995).

Although the preponderance of evidence does not suggest gender differences in justice reasoning, there is some evidence that females may be more likely than males to utilize care reasoning. Several studies found a greater use of care reasoning among females than males in samples with African American 7th grade youth (Weisz & Black, 2002), Mexican American and Anglo American college students (Gump et al., 2000), and nurses (Wilson, 1995). These findings of lack of gender differences in justice reasoning and partial support for gender differences in care reasoning support the contention by Gump et al. (2000) that justice and care reasoning may operate independently of one another.

Critiques of Gilligan's theoretical framework

A variety of strong criticisms have been launched against Gilligan's theoretical framework over the past 30 years. Some of these critiques stem from the failure, noted above, of most research to find gender differences in stage using Kohlberg's theory or in justice reasoning when responding to

hypothetical dilemmas. Walker's (1984, 1989) studies are particularly strong examples of this line of criticism. Gilligan's research has been strongly critiqued on various methodological grounds. For example, her critics allege that in her anecdotal style of reporting findings, she selectively presents data that support her pre-existing hypotheses (Broughton, 1983; Nails, 1983; Sommers, 1995). She has also been criticized for claiming gender differences in moral reasoning based on research with female-only samples (Auerbach, Blum, Smith, & Williams, 1985; Kerber, 1986; Sommers, 1995).

Scholars have additionally criticized Gilligan for implying a biological basis for any gender differences in moral reasoning while ignoring potential socially-based causes of gender differences, such as subordinate social status (Auerbach et al., 1985; Kerber, 1986; Tronto, 1987). A related critique is that Gilligan overemphasizes the significance of gender in moral reasoning while ignoring cultural characteristics such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status that could impact moral reasoning (Auerbach et al., 1985; Contratto, 1994; Nicholson, 1983; Tronto, 1987). If subordinate social status is the critical variable underlying care reasoning, we might predict this reasoning to predominate in a variety of groups (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, or people of lower socioeconomic status) with lower social status, as opposed to only in women (Tronto, 1987). Finally, a specifically feminist critique of Gilligan's theoretical framework is that it reinforces simplistic, romanticized, and old-fashioned stereotypes of men being the rational sex and women being the feeling sex that inadvertently further oppress women (Kerber, 1986; Nails, 1983; Sommers, 1995).

Culture and moral orientation

In response to the critique that cultural factors were being ignored in moral reasoning research, from the 1990s on there has been an increasing emphasis on research examining the role that culture plays in shaping moral reasoning. In this research, various aspects of culture are explored, including international differences in moral orientation, research on moral orientation in the United States with explicit attention paid to ethnicity, and research examining differences in moral orientation based on socioeconomic status (SES).

International research and socioeconomic status

Research by Miller and Bersoff (1992) and Miller, Bersoff, and Harwood (1990) examined the role of culture by comparing differences in moral judgment among children and adults in India and the United States. Both studies supported the importance of culture, as opposed to gender, in explaining the origins of moral reasoning; in fact, neither study supported Gilligan's claims that women are more likely than men to prioritize interpersonal responsiveness and care over justice considerations. Miller and Bersoff (1992) found that, in dilemmas that present conflict between justice and interpersonal considerations, Indians prioritized interpersonal considerations, whereas Americans prioritized justice considerations. Miller et al. (1990) found views of social responsibility and morality to be culturally-based, with Indians viewing a broader range of social responsibilities in moral terms than Americans.

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